

Kingdom supports fight against scourge



"Stop Aids" campaigners held a walkathon yesterday in solidarity with AIDS victims as part of Bahrain's observance of the World Aids Day. Officials from the Ministry of Health, UN Development Programme and the Central Municipal Council led the walk as they raised calls for the public to join the global battle against the scourge. The walkathon was held along Al Estiqlal Walkway – also dubbed the Exercise Avenue – in Isa Town. Doctors and nurses joined the event conducting free blood and basic health checks to participants. "Our message is that we should not give up hope," said

Dr Somaya Al Jowder, head of the National Aids Committee under the Ministry of Health. "We cannot ignore our own HIV patients. They need our love, they need our support," she said. Abbas Mafoodh, head of the Central Municipal Council health committee said, "The spread of Aids can be prevented by following a healthy lifestyle. A forum has been set for December 8 where various government and NGOs will hold talks on exploring issues related to the spread of Aids and how to prevent it.

Act now!

UN demands global war on AIDS

JOHANNESBURG (Reuters)

The UN used World AIDS Day yesterday to call for an "exceptional response" to the global crisis as African patients criticised politicians for failing to tackle a disease that kills millions each year.

The UN said that while adult infection rates had dropped in some countries due to increased use of condoms and changes in sexual behaviour, the epidemic continued to grow.

The new call is based on the simple rhyme: If you make love, wear a glove.

The number of people living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, had reached its highest level ever in 2005 at an estimated 40.3 million people, UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot said. Nearly half of them are women. AIDS has killed more than 3 million people in 2005.

A number of Asian countries marked the day by handing out free condoms, offering mobile phone games and holding flag-festooned rallies to promote awareness of the disease.

The mood was more sombre in Africa, where rage and remorse combined as the continent worst hit by the global crisis remembered its dead.

In France, President Jacques Chirac said schools should be equipped with condom vending machines and youths should be able to buy a condom for 20 euro cents (\$0.23).

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called on his people to shed their inhibitions and start talking openly about safe sex.

India says it has 5.13 million people living with HIV/AIDS, the second largest number after South Africa.

China's government, worried that the spread of AIDS could damage the country's economic development, was due to launch an AIDS awareness campaign to educate millions of migrant workers – farmers who flock to cities in search of higher-paying jobs.

Swaziland's King Mswati, criticised for his lavish lifestyle and frequent marriages in a country with one of the world's highest HIV rates, scrapped AIDS Day events on Thursday to attend to other royal functions. Act now!

Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Health said yesterday in a statement to mark World AIDS Day that the number of AIDS cases in the kingdom stands at 10,924. Just 18.4 per cent of that figure are Saudis while foreigners make up the remaining 81.6 per cent, ministry spokesman

Aids check plan for foreigners

By **VINITHA VISWANATH**

A PROGRAMME to screen migrant workers for Aids could soon be expanded to cover all foreign workers who travel to Bahrain, a senior doctor told the GDN.

Only migrant workers who travel here as housemaids, restaurant workers, health workers and barbers are currently screened for the disease, said National Sexually Transmitted Diseases Programme manager Dr Somaya Al Jowder.

However, she said the plan was to include all foreign workers in the mandatory Aids screening programme when they arrive in Bahrain.

"Discussions are underway with the Health Minister (Dr Nada Haffadh), but it is not a simple job so it may take some time," said Dr Al Jowder.

"Aids screenings are not as easy to carry out as screenings for other diseases.

"But if they (workers) test positive they will be sent back. They will not be treated in Bahrain.

"Aids screening for foreign employment seekers in Gulf countries has reduced the number of cases entering Bahrain, as well as in all parts of the world."

She revealed that since 1987, when the first Aids case was discovered in Bahrain, more than 400 expats who tested HIV positive have been deported.

The latest figures show that of 16,949 migrant workers screened upon arrival in Bahrain between January and June this year, 36 tested positive for Aids and were sent home by the Health Ministry.

"We do not keep any expatriates who test positive for Aids in Bahrain and they are immediately sent back," said Dr Al Jowder.

However, she said there are no mandatory Aids screenings for tourists and other visitors.

She was speaking to the GDN on the occasion of World Aids Day, which was marked around the world yesterday.

There are currently 23 known cases of "full-blown" Aids in Bahrain being treated by the Health Ministry.

Dr Al Jowder added that there are 96 cases of Bahrainis who have tested positive for HIV aged 25 to 39.

Ever since the first case of Aids was detected in Bahrain in 1987, records show that 105 Bahrainis have died from the disease.

Of these, 90 per cent were male.

She said the figures would shoot up by an alarming rate in coming years if action is not taken immediately and the Aids screening programme is not made stricter.

"The social impact of an Aids epidemic is painful and the economic costs are devastating," she said.

"Arab countries in general are reluctant to talk about Aids due to cultural and religious reasons and because of its link to people's sexual behaviour.

"Being a protected community we do not speak about such issues, but it is better to speak and take action to minimise the risks. Any delay in action will prove extremely costly.

"Though the number of cases registered in Bahrain is only a recorded figure of those who come to us, the actual figures will be many times higher."

It is thought that there could be hundreds of hidden Aids cases where the victims are afraid to come forward because they are afraid of being shunned by the community and even their family.

In Bahrain, 17pc of Aids cases are related to sex, 68pc through sharing dirty needles with drug users, 3pc are cases passed from mother to child, 3pc are through homosexual sex and 10pc were transmitted through blood transfusions before 1987 - when the Aids screening programme started.

"We are in the process of joining hands with the United Nations in further increasing awareness of the problem," said Dr Al Jowder.

"Our main focus will be to warn people against pre-marital and extra-marital relationships and to advise them to follow religious teachings.

"We will also involve religious leaders, civil societies, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), schools and health institutions in the campaign to make it effective.

"Rather than discriminating against Aids patients, society should come forward and give them mental and moral support to face life. "Prevention is better than cure."